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RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY  
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SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA'S HIGHEST MUSLIM LEADER DISCUSSES  
CHALLENGES, DISMISSES RADICALIZATION

REF: 08 PHNOM PENH 968

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

[11](#). (SBU) SUMMARY: In a March 12 meeting, Cambodia's Mufti, who is appointed by the King for life as the Supreme Leader of all Muslims in the country, described to Poloff some of the challenges facing his community. Although many of the difficulties faced by Muslims in Cambodia are also experienced by other religious and ethnic groups, including the majority Khmers, the base of poverty from which the Muslim minority starts creates an added obstacle to accessing many state services. Poverty has also been a driving factor behind recent migration of the Muslim population inland from their traditional home along the rivers, potentially increasing their isolation and marginalization. The Mufti acknowledged that some of the Muslim communities in Cambodia may follow stricter forms of Islam but dismissed the threat of rampant radicalization as "old news." Notwithstanding this attempt to downplay the continued pressures of extremist Muslim elements, post believes the growing population of Cham youth remain at risk. END SUMMARY.  
IDENTITY  
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[12](#). (SBU) While some texts refer to Cambodia,s Muslim population as "Khmer Islam," Cambodia,s Mufti Oknha Sos Kamry stated the majority tend to refer to themselves simply as Cham. This designation dates back to their history as descendents of refugees from the Kingdom of Champa which was one of the early Hindu Kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The majority of the Cham converted from Hinduism to Islam beginning in the 15th century. After being violently driven out of Vietnam in 1471, the Khmer kings provided the Cham refuge and they have had a mostly peaceful coexistence with the Khmer since that time.

[13](#). (SBU) Mufti Sos Kamry expressed his concern that little has changed within the Cham population for many years. He worries that they are not keeping up to date on changes both domestically and globally, and are not able to attain jobs and perform at the same levels as the Khmer. According to the Mufti, the reason the Cham lag behind the Khmer is mainly due to their almost complete annihilation during the Khmer Rouge. He stated that while 40 percent of the Khmer were killed during the Khmer Rouge era, 60 percent of the Cham were annihilated; likewise 30 percent of the Khmer were evacuated from their villages compared to 100 percent of the Cham.

MIGRATION  
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[14](#). (SBU) Known for their fishing skills, the Cham originally

settled along the banks of the Mekong River and major tributaries. However, due to the decrease in the fish catches per person over the years, which some attribute to overfishing, illegal fishing, increased population and the effects of global warming, the Cham have begun to migrate inland. Approximately 30 percent of the population has migrated to provinces such as Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, and Kampong Cham over the past few years in order to cultivate rice and other cash crops. When asked about difficulties finding land or obtaining land titles in the new communities, the Mufti said that the process can be lengthy but is usually successful. According to the Mufti, the much publicized land-grabbing by high-ranking officials affects both Cham and Khmer alike. He felt the real issue is the initial poverty level of the Cham coupled with the amount of monetary resources it takes to relocate. This is exacerbated by the absence of extended families to rely upon due to the small size of the population (although there are not exact figures, the Mufti and others estimate the Muslim population to be approximately 350,000-400,000). Although most of the Cham along the Mekong live in separate communities from the Khmer or other ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese, the communities tend to be close in proximity with access to state services. According to the Mufti, the new Cham communities also tend to be separate, but are farther away from schools and larger villages, which could further add to their isolation. To seek opportunities outside Cambodia, many Cham (up to 30 percent according to the Mufti) migrate to Malaysia due to the close historical, linguistic and religious ties to find work in factories and as domestic helpers.

#### EDUCATION

PHNOM PENH 00000170 002 OF 002

15. (SBU) A direct result of the decimation of the majority of Imams by the Khmer Rouge has been a dearth of educated instructors and modern teaching methodologies in Islamic schools. Although most Cham feel education is important and many receive some form of Islamic education, they face economic and cultural barriers which keep many out of state schools. A recent study conducted by American Institutes for Research and funded by USAID which assessed the marginalization of Cham communities found that only 55 percent of the respondents reported having ever attended state school, with the average number of years attended being six. One-third of the sample attended school up to grade three, and less than 17 percent attended secondary school. The study cited the main barriers to attaining state education included poverty, distance to state schools, the mixing of males and females in the same classroom, and difficulty with the Khmer language. In contrast, 76 percent of the respondents reported having attended an Islamic school. According to the Mufti, this is the root of the problem. While Islamic schools may be more accessible than the state schools, they lack skilled teachers, funding, and all types of study materials to include religious texts.

16. (SBU) The Mufti and other Cham leaders are working to promote education as a means of advancement as an alternative to migration abroad for low-level factory jobs which do little to develop and advance the future of the Cham. To further enhance their roles and visibility, one of the most prominent Cham leaders within the government, Secretary of State and wealthy Cham businessman Osman Hassan, requested seven additional Cham-held positions in the government. The request was submitted to PM Hun Sen, who decided to approve it after visiting Kuwait in January. All seven have been appointed as Under Secretary of States in various ministries. These appointees to current positions are in addition to the newly created Secretary of State at the Ministry of Social Affairs which will be held by former opposition party member and Muslim advocate Ahmad Yahya.

RADICALIZATION - OLD NEWS?

17. (SBU) In previous meetings, the Mufti openly discussed some of the negative changes within the Cham community which he felt stemmed from the "new Muslims" coming from the Middle East and proselytizing a less tolerant form of Islam. However, when asked about ties attached to charity from overseas during this most recent meeting, the Mufti responded by saying that problems such as those encountered at the Umm al-Qura school (Ref A) are "old news." He stated that he and the government now understand the problem, and those who provide assistance must first come to the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs which then determines whether the source is proper and legal. The Mufti did concede that some donors circumvent his Council and go directly to the communities. In order to attract more funding for schools and mosques, the Mufti said some accept the money and have changed their ways, but that it is a very small percentage and not likely to cause serious problems for Cambodia.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: In this most recent meeting, the Mufti was clearly concerned about the future of the Cham and the need for increased attention to education in order to improve their current position in society. Noticeably absent from this discussion was any anxiety over negative foreign influence on Cham communities. This may be due to a perceived decrease in tensions or simply a decision by the Mufti and government to handle such matters internally. However, post believes the pressure of extremist Islamic elements - though more low-key than before - continues and that Cham youth are at risk of being swayed by extremist orthodoxy, especially when many are given full scholarships to overseas schools. Nonetheless, the Mufti's focus on improving both the access and quality of religious and secular education for the Cham would work toward countering any of the less desirable influences of foreign charity by creating a more educated and employable Muslim minority within Cambodia. END COMMENT.  
RODLEY